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SUBJECT: ONE YEAR AFTER NATIONAL REGISTRATION, UNITED WORLD MISSION
CHURCH LARGELY SATISFIED

REF: A. HANOI 1340, B. 05 HANOI 580, C. 05 HCMC 238

¶1. Summary: On July 24, 2007, the Consul General met with Pastor Nguyen Toi, Chairman of the United World Mission Church of Vietnam (UWMC), one of Vietnam's larger Protestant denominations with approximately 22,000 adherents, largely from ethnic minority areas. Toi was generally upbeat about his church's current relationship with the GVN. Toi said that the situation for his church has been consistently improving for a number of years, particularly since Vietnam's new legal framework on religion went into effect in 2004 and 2005 (reftels) and since the church received its national registration license in September 2006. Noting some ongoing issues, Toi's major complaint was the competition his church is receiving from other Protestant groups under Vietnam's religious freedom policy. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Since the United World Mission Church's (UWMC) national registration, Pastor Toi said the typical application turnaround time for the majority of new UWMC-affiliated congregations is one week, but noted that there were problems in a handful of rural areas, particularly in the Northwest. Looking back over the past year, Toi also said that in the beginning registering was very difficult and slow but that by working with both local and national authorities -- and by lots of in-house learning on how to do the required paperwork -- the situation has improved dramatically for his UWMC congregations.

¶3. (SBU) Pastor Toi said the most common reason for delays is that when authorities check registration documents they find that some of the UWMC-affiliated church members have already switched to another church. In a classic example of be careful of what you wish for, Pastor Toi complained that because of religious freedom reforms, there are (in his view) too many Protestant denominations operating in the Central Highlands today and that some churches are quite aggressive in recruiting members from other churches, even going so far as giving people money to join. After complaining somewhat bitterly, he back-tracked a bit and said that the actual number of church-jumping believers is fairly small, but he upheld his contention that there are just too many denominations as a result of Vietnam's new policy of religious freedom.

¶4. (SBU) Pastor Toi said that his current focus as chairman of UWMC is on the denomination's efforts to train approximately fifty new pastors and religious workers, which UWMC has been done clandestinely since 1975. The UWMC's current training session is the first time that the training has occurred openly under the church's national license and with the support of the GVN. GVN's 'support' for training clergy also includes the teaching of two government-mandated courses by government-supplied instructors--History of Vietnam and Vietnamese Laws and Regulations. Toi stated that he hopes to expand the training to 150 pastors over the next two years. Several UWMC pastors have been sent abroad to attend religious

conferences and seminars, but Toi himself has not participated in any overseas seminars.

¶5. (SBU) Pastor Toi said that the UWMC is also in the process of obtaining 'legal person' status, a form of incorporation which will allow the church to expand its educational and social activities. Toi also said that once the church obtained legal person status, they would be able to enter into negotiations with the government to obtain additional land for use as offices and training centers for religious workers. Toi said that the church lost all its land after the fall of the Republic of Vietnam in 1975.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: Pastor Toi's complaints about other denominations 'poaching' a congregation's members before registration occurred appear to us to be a backhanded compliment of the GVN's new policy on religious freedom. That said, the GVN's support of UWMC's training classes for religious workers on the condition that the courses include what amounts to propaganda for the GVN is a good example of the continued suspicion with which the GVN regards religious activities. END COMMENT.

¶7. This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.

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